

To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

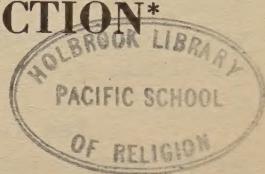
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## THE CHURCH IN RURAL RECONSTRUCTION\*

By Eugene Smathers



### A UNIFIED LIFE

As a churchman, I am concerned with the task of rural reconstruction. I rejoice in the growth of FRIENDS OF THE LAND and in the wide dissemination of its basic convictions. I am convinced that the Church must incorporate much of the philosophy which guides FRIENDS OF THE LAND into its thinking and program. Therefore, I am grateful for the fact that the Church has been given recognition on the program of this Conference. The Church has much to learn from FRIENDS OF THE LAND; it also has an essential contribution to make to the total task of rural reconstruction. Rural reconstruction requires the best which science and technology can give. Yet these contributions alone are not enough. Science and technology can destroy as well as reconstruct.

The Church, with its awareness of the sacredness of life, and which has as its primary concern the total redemption of man, has a significant responsibility in our common task. I see in the rural church, once it can secure a ministry devoted to the total needs of the people, an instrument of great potential power for the reconstruction of rural America.

We are primarily concerned here with the relationship between the conservation of the land, and human nutrition. This interest in nutrition grows out of our concern for the health and well-being of all people. Human life is a unity and we can analyze its constituent parts only by abstraction. In this wholeness of life the physical, mental, social, and spiritual cannot be separated. They are interrelated and interdependent. We see this fact illustrated in the science of medicine. This or that ill cannot be properly treated in isolation. The patient is an organic unity and must receive treatment accordingly. There are also studies which indicate that even to treat the patient as a whole is not enough, for "patients have families". The Peckham experiment, in England, suggests that patients even have "communities". If this is true in regard to physical health, it is equally true for man's spiritual development. Religion,

\*This paper was read before the annual meeting of Friends of the Soil at Athens, Ohio, June, 1946. The Rev. Eugene Smathers is a home missionary of the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and pastor of the well-known Calvary Church and leader of successful community projects at Big Lick, Tenn. A full description of these very constructive rural enterprises is given in Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletins Nos. 61 and 66.

to be real, must permeate all of life.

Human life is both a unity within itself and a part of the totality of life. It is inextricably bound in the whole stream of organic life, from the simplest soil organism to the most highly developed forms. This fact was recognized in the Genesis story which says that man was made from the dust of the earth. The Apostle Paul expressed this fact when he wrote: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now". Man, through ignorance and sin, can bring disruption and chaos into the unity and balance of Nature. As Lewis Mumford says: "All creatures live by complicated partnerships, but in man the circle of responsible control and conscious co-operation has been widened, and without the counter-balancing development of love and understanding his powers of annihilation would now be boundless". (Values for Survival, p. 86, Harcourt, Brace & Co.).

Two facts must be recognized by the Church, if it is to be effective as an agency for reconstruction. First, man is a unity, and man is a part of his physical and cultural environment. Souls cannot be saved in abstraction; soils, society and souls belong together. It is the faith of the Church that God the Creator has a gracious purpose for His creation. Out of this faith comes the conviction that God is the Lord of all life and that His will has to do with the whole and any separation of secular and sacred is superficial. Second, God's intention for man is the abundant life. The insights of our Judea-Christian heritage reveal that this life is conditioned by a trinity of relationships: to God, man's Creator; to man, his brother; and to the earth, his present home. None of these relationships can be neglected or ignored without loss. The great contribution of FRIENDS OF THE LAND, and its sister movement, FRIENDS OF THE SOIL, is in promoting an awareness of the third of this trinity: man's relationship and dependence upon the earth, and his moral responsibility for its care and use. To sin against the earth, through abuse and wastage, or to sin against our brothers through selfish hoarding of the earth and its life-giving resources, resources both for body and spirit, is a denial of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

#### SPIRITUAL BASIS FOR RECONSTRUCTION

Conservation and enrichment of the land is basic to national and world reconstruction, and the Church must proclaim man's moral responsibility as a tenant of the Almighty.

The prophet Isaiah had an amazing insight regarding the relationship between land use and national well-being, when he wrote:

"Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no room, and ye be made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer yield an ephah." (5:8-10)

In a statement made by seventy-five Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders entitled "Man's Relationship to the Land", we find agreement about man's stewardship. Say these religious leaders:

"God created the world with a purpose, and through His loving Providence He maintains the world for the good of all mankind. Therefore,

all human beings possess a direct natural right to have access to created natural resources.

"God's intention in creation is to enable man to live with dignity in accord with his noble nature and destiny, to establish and maintain a family and to be a useful member of society ....

"The land is God's greatest material gift to mankind. It is a fundamental source of food, fiber, and fuel. The right to use such an elemental source of life and development is essential for human welfare ....

"Land is a special kind of property. Ownership of land does not give an absolute right to use or abuse, nor is it devoid of social responsibilities. It is in fact a stewardship. It implies such land tenure and use as to enable the possessor to develop his personality, maintain a decent standard of living for his family and fulfill his social obligations. At the same time, the land steward has a duty to enrich the soil he tills and to hand it down to future generations as a thank offering to God, the giver, and as a loving inheritance to his children's children."

Wherever man neglects his stewardship of the soil and despoils the earth, the Church must proclaim judgment, in the name of God, and preach repentance as the only way to reconstruction and renewal. Through the whole range of its program of worship and teaching, it should seek to develop love for the land as God's most precious material gift, "a land which the Lord they God careth for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year unto the end of the year." (Deut. 11:12).

The Church should help all people, especially those on the land, to see scientific principles of good land use as the laws of God, and to understand that the scientist, who humbly and honestly seeks to discover and apply these laws, is acting in harmony with the petition: "Thy will be done." This implies that the Church and its leadership should gain an understanding of the programs of the various agencies working for the restoration and enrichment of the soil, and recognize that God works for the reconstruction of His world and for the well-being of man through more than ecclesiastical channels alone.

There is a growing awareness in the Church that poor land means poor people, poor economically and in other aspects of life as well. Eroded, wasted soil means weak institutions, of which the church is one. T. S. Buie, in a study of churches in South Carolina, has provided a concrete illustration of the close relationship between the adequacy of church programs and the condition of the soil. The greater the erosion, the lower was the soil fertility, and the less effective were the churches. From the standpoint of its basic faith and as a matter of self preservation, the Church has a concern in the soil.

#### THE CHURCH AND LAND TENURE

Since human life is a complex unity, all that helps determine man's attitude toward the soil is part of the problem of conservation. Thus conservation cannot be divorced from land tenure, the manner in which man holds his land. The prophets of the Old Testament saw this and warned against the concentration of land ownership. The whole system of tenure outlined for the

Hebrew nation had as its purpose the wide distribution of rights in land. Land-lordism and tenancy result in the exploitation of soil resources. We see this clearly in our own nation, where with the highest rate of tenancy we find the greatest soil abuse. Justice and security of tenure seem to be essential ingredients of stewardship. A community of owner-operators is preferable to a community of tenants. Ownership contributes to the personality of the owner and enables him to be a more effective steward of the land entrusted to him. Land is so basic to human life and development that widespread distribution is essential.

Because of this relationship between tenure and conservation, and between tenure and human development, the Church has a deep concern. This means that the Church should ally itself with those forces which are struggling to safeguard and extend the ideal of the family operated farm. We are at a period of crisis in our national land policy. The issue is between the commercialized, absentee owned, large-scale farm, the factory in the field, and the family farm where farming is a way of life as well as a means of making a living. Which shall take precedence: money and a slight degree of economic efficiency or human welfare; profits or persons? The struggle is between what Elmer Peterson calls "moneyways" and "soilways".

#### SOME PRACTICAL STEPS

The Church has the responsibility of helping America make this decision. The Church should experiment with means and methods of improving land tenure practices, and for helping young families become established on farms of their own. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the Town and Country Committee of the Protestant Churches, and the Jewish Agricultural Society are working on these problems. The Church of the Brethren has established a land purchase fund from which, upon the recommendation of the pastor and officers of the local church, a young couple may secure assistance in the purchase of a farm. Other denominations are working on similar plans. The Church of the Latter Day Saints has made family settlement a traditional policy. Some of us believe that the denominational boards, which now have millions of dollars invested in stocks and bonds, could well invest some of this money in land, and thereby both receive a return on their investment and make an investment in new families on the land.

There is much which local churches can do even though they do not have a special plan or fund for helping families secure land. Calvin Schnucker, while pastor at Titonka, Iowa, was able during a period of six years to lift the percentage of owner-operated farms within his parish from 34 to 60 per cent. He began by preaching on farming as a way of life, the need for thrift if a young couple were to become owners, and the need for scientific training in the successful operation of a farm. While trying to get these ideas across to his young people, he surveyed his parish to determine what farms were for sale. He then went over the available farms with the county agent to determine whether the price was in line with productive capacity. Finally, when a couple had saved something to apply on the purchase price, the pastor took him to the banker and county agent for advice in selecting a farm. The pastor's recommendation made it possible for the young man to secure more generous credit terms than might otherwise have been possible. In this rather informal way and without the investment of money, one church was able to change the tenure situation within its parish. The church can also be of assistance in encouraging a greater degree of family maintenance and diversification in farming.

Since the matter of soil conservation is basically a matter of





attitude, it is also a question of inner desire. The best of land can become a rural slum where there is no desire for something better. From research and experimentation we have learned how to rebuild and enrich our soils. But mere "know-how" without an inner compulsion to use our information for the fulfilment of God's purposes is ineffective. Most farmers know that rows on the contour prevent erosion and improve crop yields, but many still run the rows up and down hill. In the final analysis, it is the farmers who must restore and conserve our soil. Unless farm people believe that life on the land is worth preserving, they do not have this inward compulsion to save the soil. If we who live on the land despise our calling, if we do not have the opportunity for a decent and wholesome life, if we do not see the social significance of our labors and the possibilities they afford for becoming fellow-workers with God, we will not be good stewards and the fruits of our abuse of the soil will make us despise rural life even more.

#### TOWARD THE IMPROVEMENT OF RURAL LIFE

The Church and other agencies concerned with rural reconstruction must be interested in every effort to improve the quality of living among rural people and to promote a higher appreciation of the values inherent in their way of life. The Church can also help non-farm people to recognize the importance of the farmer in our modern, industrial society. The farmer will recognize his social responsibilities to the degree in which society recognizes his social significance. If farm people are to believe that life on the land is good, they must have adequate rural institutions and facilities. A poor rural school is as much a symptom of erosion as a huge gully. Inadequate educational opportunity is a contributing cause, as well as a result of erosion. How can we expect people to treat the soil as a trust for coming generations, when the children of the present generation are the victims of an inadequate educational system? The same is true of poor churches, poor roads, lack of electric power, lack of modern plumbing and other home conveniences, which create dissatisfaction with rural life. These are material concerns but they have an important role in determining the attitudes of people to the land.

As to rural health and medical care. Charles F. Brannan, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, in a report to the Senate Committee summarized some startling facts which debunk the idea that rural people are our healthiest citizens. Rural health care is about forty years behind the times. This is especially important when we realize that rural areas are the seedbed of future population. While a little over 40 per cent of our population live in rural areas, over 50 per cent of our children under 15 years of age live on farms. Fifty-three out of every 100 farm boys of 18 and 19 who came up for the draft were rejected for physical defects. This was 40 per cent higher than that of other population groups. The death rate of mothers in childbirth is a third higher on farms than in cities. The death rate of babies is a fourth higher. Typhoid fever claims three times as many farm as city victims. Despite the fact that 43 per cent of the population is rural, only 18 per cent of the doctors are in rural localities. The same is true of hospitals, and yet there are usually empty beds in rural hospitals. In 1941, the average city family spent \$26 for medical care. The average farm family spent only \$14. In face of these facts, can we expect farm people to feel that life on the land is good?

An improved level of living, combined with recognition of the cultural values of rural life, can go far in making farm people feel that their life is good. The Church should help safeguard and strengthen the values inherent in

rural life. We have already mentioned two of these: man's moral relationship to the earth as the steward of God, and the dignity of ownership. Other similar values include: the primacy of the family, the spirit of mutual aid and cooperative effort as concrete channels for expressing Christian living.

While the Church has a responsibility for rural reconstruction in the areas which I have mentioned, its greatest responsibility is in social reconstruction. But it must set its own house in order. An active, Christian program in every rural community of America is essential if the Church is to make its contribution felt. But in many cases the church itself is a problem, rather than the instrument of God for human redemption. The Church must overcome its divisiveness in the community and recognize that it is not a self-sufficient institution. It must rid itself of institutional self-centeredness and become the channel of service it is intended to be. There is too great disparity between the quality of the programs of the churches in cities and those in rural communities. This disparity can be overcome only by the acceptance, on the part of the Church at large, of responsibility for an adequate church program in every local community. Where local resources do not make possible an adequate ministry and program, they must be supplemented from the resources of the Church at large. Unless the denominations are willing to sacrifice a degree of sovereignty so that a united church strategy can be developed for rural America, the Church will miss its great opportunity.

If the program of the local church is to be in harmony with the basic insights of its faith, its inclusive task is that of developing a Christian community. It will seek to make conscious and Christian the inherent possibilities of community in rural life. The goal of its efforts will be the transformation of separate families into a community of families, consciously working together for their mutual welfare and for a better world. The "sociological" community is to become a Christian community, a group of people sharing common loyalties to Christ and His way of life. It will call men to a finer sense of stewardship of the whole natural order whose creator is God.